

PETER SARANTAPOULAS

USS *ARGONNE* SURVIVOR

#261

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BY JEFF PAPPAS

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(Conversation off-mike)

Jeff Pappas (JP): The following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 6, 1998, at two p.m. The person being interviewed is Peter Sarantapoulas, who was on board USS *Argonne* on December 7, 1941.

Pete, for the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth and the date?

Peter Sarantapoulas (PS): My name is Peter Sarantapoulas. I was born in Johnson City, New York and that was on June 22, 1923.

JP: So tell me a little bit about your upbringing. Did you stay in Johnson City, or did you move?

PS: No, at the age of nine years old, my father moved to Binghamton, which is right next to Johnson City, and I spent the rest of my youth in that area, Binghamton, New York.

JP: Tell me about your parents.

PS: What's that?

JP: Tell me about your parents, your mother and father.

PS: Well, my mother and father both came from Greece. They came through Ellis Island. They were legal immigrants. And my father went to work for Endicott Johnson shoes in Johnson City, New York. He worked there for forty-two years. And he always thought he had a good job. He was so thankful that he worked steady through the depression years.

JP: Mm-hm. Your mother was a homemaker.

PS: Mother was definitely a homemaker. That's all she did. She was a real Greek because she came over not with my father but later on and much younger than my father. And she would always speak to us in Greek and we would answer her in English. But my father always spoke in English 'cause he came over here when he was twelve years old.

JP: So how's your Greek?

PS: Pretty fair, I would say. I went to Greek school when I was a kid for two years in Binghamton, New York.

JP: Did you go to high school in Binghamton?

PS: Yes, I graduated from Binghamton North High School in the year 1941, January 1941.

JP: And tell me, after high school, did you go on and join the service...

PS: Well, the day I graduated, I had to go to Albany, New York. I enlisted in Binghamton, New York, but I had to be sworn in in Albany. The day of my graduation, I was in Albany, New York. I was being sworn into the United States Navy.

JP: So you were thinking about the service before you even graduated from high school?

PS: Oh yeah, I had all the paperwork figured out before I even graduated. It was just a matter of me finishing graduation and going into the navy.

JP: Why is that? Had you always wanted to join the service?

PS: Well, jobs were tough. Not so much getting into the service, but frankly everybody had a high regard for navy. At that time, you had to have a high school education before you could even get into the service.

JP: So you went off to and you enlisted up in Albany?

PS: I was sworn in in Albany and they sent me to Newport, Rhode Island, where I went to boot camp for a period of nine weeks, I believe. And they gave us a ten-day leave and we all went back home. I went back to Newport and they asked me what I wanted to be in the navy, what career I preferred. I said I would like to be a yeoman because I knew how to type. A yeoman is a secretarial type of work.

JP: Is that a skill that you had learned in high school?

PS: I'd learned how to type in high school. Yes. So they said, "Well, we're going to send you to radio school. We need radiomen worse than we need yeomen," and the fact that I could type is part of the radioman's job.

JP: Okay. So you went off to radio school.

PS: So they sent me to San Diego, California and I went to school there for four months during the summer of 1941.

JP: Now did the navy have the—was the radio school in San Diego at the time?

PS: In San Diego at the Naval Training Station, they called it. And when I finished school there after four months, they sent me up to San Pedro and I got on board the USS *Argonne*, AG-31.

JP: Now, when was this, during the summer of '41?

PS: Fall of '41.

JP: Okay, so September, October of 1941.

PS: Right around October, right.

JP: So they had put you on the *Argonne*.

PS: And we sailed from San Pedro straight through, straight to Pearl Harbor. We tied up at Ten-Ten dock.

JP: Okay, and that was in October?

PS: October, just before Pearl Harbor Day, right.

JP: At that time, in October of '41, had you heard any rumors about an impending...

PS: Well...

JP: ...conflict with Japan?

PS: All you had to do was read the papers and listen to the radio —television wasn't around then. And you knew that the Japanese and the Americans were having problems in Washington D.C. They were having meetings. And the rumors were around from the enlisted men's point of view that the navy was on the move, the Japanese navy.

JP: So the Japanese navy was on the move.

PS: Was on the move, yes.

JP: Meaning?

PS: We did not think that they would really go to war against the United States.

JP: Something that you thought was just an impossibility at that time.

PS: Not really an impossibility, but just didn't think it'd happen. My personal opinion is that Washington thought that if the Japanese were to hit the United States, they would hit the Philippines, being closer to Japan and not as strong as the Pearl Harbor base. Pearl Harbor was the biggest base in the Pacific, most powerful base, United States. Well, the Japanese out-maneuvered us. They studied Pearl Harbor; they studied the military personnel. And they asked—they had a spy there—I can't think of his name right now. And they asked him when were the ships mostly tied up at Pearl Harbor. And he said, "Sunday morning."

JP: Tell me a little bit about the *Argonne*, about the crew and the commissioned officers.

PS: Well, the *Argonne* was a repair ship. What we did when we tied up at Ten-Ten dock, little smaller craft would come alongside if they needed repair work. We had a lot of machinist's mates aboard that ship. They would either make the part or install the part. I was a radioman. I was learning the radio business. I just finished school and I was what they call a radio striker, learning the business aboard the USS *Argonne*. And we stayed right there at Ten-Ten dock. On occasion a submarine would come alongside. They needed some work done, we fixed it. Our ship fixed it, I didn't, but the ship did.

JP: So the *Argonne* was essentially responsible for the maintenance of other navy vessels.

PS: Yeah, yeah. And we were also—we had an admiral aboard ship, rear admiral, Com Base Force [*Commander Base Force*]. And if anybody in the navy, any command needed

any supplies, they had to ask him to get those supplies. He was commander of base for us.

JP: Remember his name?

PS: Offhand, I can't think of it.

JP: That's okay, but he was on the *Argonne* when you were there?

PS: Yes, he was stationed aboard the *Argonne*. He had Marine orderlies aboard the *Argonne*. Maybe a handful, five or six. Plus his mess attendants and what have you.

JP: What was your first impression of Hawaii?

PS: Oh, I loved it, but I was homesick. (Laughs) Being so far away and joining the navy less than a year. But we used to get liberty before Pearl Harbor attack. We take the bus to downtown Honolulu, change buses to go to Waikiki Beach. And at that time, you only had two hotels there—the [*Moana*] and the Royal Hawaiian. Now, the Royal Hawaiian had fourteen acres of bougainvillea around it. It was a beautiful place. And they treated sailors well. We could go to any of those places and got treated with respect before the war. And swimming at Waikiki was a lot of fun. We spent a lot of time there.

JP: What was some of your favorite things that you liked to do on your down time?

PS: Down time? Mostly sightseeing, but basically we didn't hang around downtown. We just changed buses and then went out to Waikiki Beach. In those days, to go from Pearl Harbor to Waikiki Beach, you took a little two-lane road from Pearl Harbor to downtown Honolulu and pineapple

fields on both sides of that. And then, you change buses in Honolulu and then you went on to Waikiki.

JP: What were some of the favorite things that you liked to do in Hawaii?

PS: Well, basically sightseeing. It was all new. I had—don't forget, I went from Binghamton, New York to Newport, Rhode Island to San Diego, California to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, so it was all interesting to me. And being about eighteen years of age it was really something to do.

JP: Talking to one of your colleagues earlier this morning from another vessel, he had said that he had written to his mother, that it was part of the protocol of his ship, that the commanding officer would ask his men to write back to their families. Had you experienced that on the *Argonne*?

PS: Letter writing?

JP: Mm-hm.

PS: Yeah, I used to write at least two letters a week home. And in those days, we could say we were on board the USS *Argonne*, Pearl Harbor, T. H., Territory of Hawaii. Hawaii was not a state at that time.

JP: That's right. That's right.

PS: Hawaii didn't become a state until President Eisenhower.

JP: Right. So you wrote a lot. You wrote back, you wrote letters.

PS: Oh yes. Letters was a big thing for servicemen, especially sailors, being on the sea. We had a lot of time to write.

JP: Did you receive letters?

PS: What's that?

JP: Did you receive letters from home?

PS: Oh yeah. Oh yes. I was getting letters from girls I went to high school with. My family would write to me and I had three brothers, they would all write. Letter writing was very, very big, not only just before the war, but especially during the war. And I used to have papers sent to me, the Binghamton newspapers. It might be a month off, but I would still read 'em. (Laughs)

JP: Tell me about your brothers. You hadn't mentioned the brothers before.

PS: Well, I had a next younger brother, he joined the navy too. And he wound up in Germany, based over in the European Theater. He didn't go out with the (inaudible).

JP: What's your brother's name?

PS: George, his name was George. And I had two other brothers, but they were too young. One of 'em, Anthony, number three son of my father, he got into the Korean War. And he wound up in Chosin Reservoir and all those places.

JP: Navy...

PS: He was in the Marines.

JP: Marines. So you had—so three brothers and yourself.

PS: Three brothers in service. My mother was very proud of that, coming from Greece and she thought a lot of it. And she had a star in the window when I was in there. I

remember that. All the parents were very proud of their sons and daughters that were in the service.

JP: So you're on the *Argonne*, now you're learning the techniques of radio communications. You had already gone to school in San Diego.

PS: And, well, I remained on the *Argonne* for three months after Pearl Harbor. I never left Pearl Harbor. I watched the *Arizona* burn for about a week, I think, heavy black smoke. The *Oklahoma* was rolled over.

JP: Well, let's go back. Let's go about a few hours before the attack, on Sunday morning.

PS: Right before the attack, I got up at the usual time, which I think was 0600 in the morning.

JP: You're on ship at the time?

PS: Aboard ship, aboard USS *Argonne*. Tied up at Ten-Ten dock. I went down and had my breakfast and I can tell you what I had for breakfast that day, sausages and pancakes. I never forgot that. Now, I was supposed to go on liberty at 0900 and I was looking forward to it. And I had put my trousers on, but I didn't put my jumper on because I didn't want to get it dirty. We were wearing whites in those days. So I had a little time to kill. Now, I'm talking about 0730. I had nothing to do but wait for 0900 to go on liberty. So I decided to go up into the radio shack. And just before eight o'clock...

JP: Now, is the radio shack on ship?

PS: Aboard the ship.

JP: Where is that located on the ship?

PS: It's located right up in the officers' quarters at the top of the ship. The admiral's quarters are up in front and the radio shack was right behind the captain's quarters. A radio shack is always near the officers' quarters. And we used to sleep down in the hold. For a radioman, you'd get out of the hold, go all the way up to the top, but we used to call that officers' country. And we gotta go back down to crew's quarters to go to sleep and eat. That's where we ate.

JP: Do you remember any of the commanding officers on deck?

PS: Well, the commanding officer's name was Talbot. Now, when Pearl Harbor was bombed in the beginning, neither the captain nor the admiral were aboard the ship. They came running aboard the ship during the attack. And this is typical of peacetime U.S. Navy. Most of your long term officers had homes on the beach, families on the beach, and that's where they spent—the fleet would go out on Monday and they would maneuver 'til about Friday, come back in and then everybody's on liberty. And the Japanese knew that (chuckles).

JP: But being a radio person, you went up to the radio shack at about 7:30, had you heard any of the radio contact from the *Ward* about the midget submarines?

PS: There was no warning at all. What we did, I can remember, one of the radioman's name was Searcy, and I think he's long gone, because he was much older than I was. We heard several explosions and we couldn't figure out. When you hear one or two explosions, you don't get too excited because Pearl Harbor is a big navy yard anyhow. There's always a lot of noise going on. But after about four or five explosions, well, we said, "What's going on?"

So we ran over to the, what we called a hatch, which was the door, and we opened it and we looked right over to where the *Arizona* was. Now, the *Arizona* was blowing up. Heavy black smoke around it. You looked down further to where the *Oklahoma* was. That was starting to roll over. And about that time, the Japanese starting strafing to where my ship was, Ten-Ten dock area.

JP: What was your first impression when you heard the bombs, other than that you really...

PS: Well, at first, we couldn't comprehend what was going on. We went out on the deck, top deck, looking up we saw planes all over the place. Somebody thought maneuvers. Somebody said Germans. But then we started to see what we call the "meatballs" on the Japanese planes and we knew the Japanese were bombing us. So my first reaction was to run from one side of the ship, 'cause they were strafing through that area and I had whites and they could see me very easy. I was on top deck.

JP: You had weights on?

PS: Whites, white uniform.

JP: Whites, whites on.

PS: And I was running up on top. And we finally—unfortunately peacetime navy, you kept all your ammunition and your guns covered up when you're in port. All this had to be uncovered; the guns had to be uncovered. They had to find the guys with the keys to open up the ammunition lockers. And I was supposed to be in the radio shack, but I wound up handing ammunition. I didn't know anything about guns, but I was just handing...

JP: Well, tell me about the gunnery ability of the *Argonne*. It was a repair ship. What did it have for...?

PS: Well, the biggest, we had...

(Conversation off-mike.)

JP: So how much artillery was on the *Argonne*?

PS: Well, the biggest—we had a five-inch gun on the fantail. That was the biggest gun. Now, the *Argonne* was built shortly after World War I. We also had some fifty-caliber machine guns, water-cooled, antique guns. And before the attack was over, I think every gun on that ship was in use at one time or another, including the five-incher.

JP: How much time did it take to uncover all the guns?

PS: Well, I would say we probably got some guns going in ten minutes, but by the time all the guns were going, it was probably around 0830. The attack started at 0755.

JP: Now, tell me, where was the *Argonne* located at Pearl at the time of the attack?

PS: We were tied up at Ten-Ten dock. Fortunately, we were on the inboard side. The dock was between us and Battleship Row. Battleship Row was straight across. We could see all the ships over there. Now during the attack, which lasted for two hours—they bombed us for two hours—the only battleship that got under way was the USS *Nevada* and she came right by the *Argonne*. And when the Japanese saw she was heading seaward, and when the Japanese saw this battleship heading seaward, they immediately pounced on her. They dove-bombed her and torpedoed it. And frankly, she started to sink, and they run it up on the beach up there.

She sat there, even after I left, she was still sitting there on the beach. They call it Nevada Point today.

JP: What were your responsibilities once the attack started on the *Argonne*? What did you do?

PS: When the attack started, I was supposed to be in the radio shack. That was my so-called battle station. But they didn't need me in there. We knew we were under attack. Now, right after the attack started, I went back into the radio shack and now the messages were coming in, "Pearl Harbor under attack. This is no drill. Pearl Harbor under attack. This is no drill."

Well, by then it was too late.

JP: So what did you do after that?

PS: Well, I wound up on an ammunition line. And we were handing the ammunition from the bottom of the ship all the way up to the guns. And I was just helping to pass it along. And I was supposed to be in the radio shack.

JP: How much fire did the *Argonne* take from the enemy?

PS: The *Argonne* never got hit during the attack. All they did, they did come strafing through there, but they didn't hit anything. Now they said they shot down some of their antennas, but I don't recall that.

JP: What did you do after the attack?

PS: After the attack, I went back to being a radioman and we maintained security watches like four hours on, four hours off. They brought out all the rifles on the *Argonne* and gave every sailor aboard a 1903 Springfield because they thought

sooner or later the Japanese were going to invade and I guess we were supposed to fight to the last man.

JP: So you stayed on the *Argonne* after the attack?

PS: Oh yes, I stayed right on the *Argonne* 'til the following March. And then I had orders to come back to the States, which I couldn't believe. And I came all the way back to New York City and Norfolk. And from Norfolk, I had to go down to Pascagoula, Mississippi and got on a brand new transport, the USS *George Clymer*. It was an APA attack transport. Brand new ship. From Pascagoula, Mississippi, we sailed through the Gulf of Mexico without an escort. Somebody thought they saw a periscope and we had a five-inch gun on that, and they fired it in the direction of the periscope. I think it was a stick floating around out there myself. But everybody was on edge.

JP: And when was this? Was this 1943?

PS: Forty-two.

JP: Late '42.

PS: Forty-two. Yeah, right after Pearl Harbor. This is in the summer of '42.

JP: So you're heading off now to your new assignment.

PS: Yes, aboard the USS *George Clymer*, as a radioman. And we sailed around to Norfolk, Virginia. We went around Florida. We stayed overnight in Key West, believe it or not, but no one was allowed off the ship. And then we went to Charleston, South Carolina first. We spent six weeks there. They were doing some finishing up work on the USS *George Clymer*. From Charleston, we went up to Norfolk. And we loaded up with army guys. And we made a practice landing

at Virginia Beach. At that time, you only had a couple hotels on Virginia Beach.

JP: Mm-hm.

PS: And then we loaded up and we sailed out one day and every day, more and more ships would join the convoy until we had like 400 ships in the convoy. And I'm talking eleven months after Pearl Harbor.

JP: Did you know what was going—did you know where you were going?

PS: At the beginning, I think we all surmised where we were going. We probably thought we were going to Europe. But as we got out, they told us we were going to go to North Africa. Part of the fleet would go into Casablanca and part of the fleet would go into Port Lyautey. And my part of the fleet went into Port Lyautey. Now, being a radioman, I was assigned to go on the beach in the fourth wave. We had Higgins boats aboard the ship. And I did. That was part of a five-man radio team. We hit the beach and stayed there and the soldiers hit the beach and had to go on in. They went up to North Africa. That was the beginning of Patton's third army, more or less.

JP: Was there any enemy fire on the beach?

PS: Oh yeah. Oh yes, the French and the Germans. Now, France had fallen, capitulated by then. And that was French Morocco in those days. And the Germans moved in and took over control of that area. And there were French soldiers and my understanding was they were helping the Germans fire arms for a couple of days, then they started surrendering after that.

But we land on the beach and we had two battleships right off the beach, the *New York* and the *Texas*, firing over our heads, onto the German and French position, and the French were firing back. Now, we're on the beach, this is all going back and forth.

Now, we had another battleship with us, the *Massachusetts*, and she went into Casablanca.

JP: So now you're in North Africa. How much time did you spend...?

PS: Well, we spent ten days on the beach.

JP: Mm-hm.

PS: And by then the beach area was secured. We came back aboard the ship. There were no dock facilities at Port Lyautey. We went up to Casablanca. We went into Casablanca Harbor and we finished unloading our supplies. And while we were up there, the *Massachusetts* was there and she had tangled with the *Jean Bart*, which was a French battleship. And the *Massachusetts* actually got banged up there and she still has those scars to this day, up in Massachusetts (inaudible).

JP: Oh, it's up in Fall River.

PS: Yeah.

JP: Massachusetts.

PS: Fall River, Mass. I've been aboard it.

JP: Correct. So you stayed with the *Argonne* through your time, and even in North Africa.

PS: No, I was with USS *George Clymer*.

JP: Oh, I'm sorry. That's right, the *George Clymer*. Correct. So...

PS: And then we came back to Norfolk, Virginia, and they gave us a five-day leave after North Africa campaign. And I think they figured we deserved it or something. (Chuckles) Oh, well back to Binghamton on my five-day leave, then went back to Norfolk and we loaded up with Seabees, construction battalion, navy Seabees. And we formed a convoy off Norfolk and we went through the Panama Canal, Christmas Day, 1942. And we went all the way to New Hebrides, New Caledonia, in that area and we finally wound up at Guadalcanal on February 6. Now Guadalcanal was considered secured on February 9. We were there three days before. While there, we picked up about fifteen Japanese prisoners and we took them down to Wellington, New Zealand. We discharged the construction battalion, the Seabees, and loaded up with the Japanese prisoners, only a handful. The Marines were guard—the navy had nothing to do with that. And we took them down to New Zealand. And that was early 1943, the first part.

And we sailed all around the Pacific and during that time, I spent five months on Guadalcanal. The admiral staff I was on, Admiral Reifsneider, commander, Amphibious Group Four, went ashore on Guadalcanal. By now, Guadalcanal basically was secure, as far as the ground fighting, but we were getting bombed every night by one or two Japanese planes. And once when I was there, the Japanese sent a hundred planes against Henderson Airfield, which was the airfield on Guadalcanal.

JP: Mm-hm.

PS: And we finally made a practice landing again with the Marines on Guadalcanal. We loaded up and the admiral was aboard another ship, the *Hunter Liggett*, which was a Coast Guard ship, USS *Hunter Liggett*. And I went along as part of the staff, as a radioman. And we invaded Bougainville at Empress Augusta Bay. I never forgot that. And I guess we went back to Guadalcanal. We hung around that area.

And then later on, we made another practice landing when we had the invasion of Guam. After that, we came all the way back to the States, San Diego, California to be exact. And they gave us a thirty-day leave this time. I went all the way back to Binghamton. That's all the way across the country.

And then we had to go back to Mare Island. We had to check in up there. And we went aboard the USS *Eldorado* for a couple of weeks. And from there we sailed to Pearl Harbor again. And then, at Pearl Harbor, we went aboard the USS *Panamint* AGC-13, a communication ship.

JP: Now, this is still all 1943?

PS: This is '43, yeah. Forty-four. And yeah, this is '44, 1944. And we left Pearl Harbor, large convoy, and now we're headed for Okinawa and we invaded Okinawa April 1, 1945. And I was there aboard the USS *Panamint*, AGC-13, which was a communications ship. Now, I didn't have to go ashore on that one and I was thankful for that. But I remained aboard the USS *Panamint* for seventy-seven days. And while there, our admiral, we went aboard another ship, USS *Biscayne*, a Coast Guard ship, a destroyer type Coast Guard ship. And we invaded three other islands off Okinawa, and one of those islands was Ie Shima, where Ernie Pyle was killed, a famed war correspondent of World War II. He was killed on Ie Shima. And that was off the coast off Okinawa.

And after we finished invading those three little islands, I went back aboard the USS *Panamint* and I got orders to go back to school in Dearborn, Michigan. Now, I'm radioman first-class by now, but they were sending me to advanced electronics school in Dearborn, Michigan. I couldn't believe it. After seventy-seven days in Okinawa, going through 300 air raids from one plane to any number of planes. Okinawa is only 300 miles off the coast of Japan. I go back to Dearborn, Michigan and started school. And this had to be late August. And during August, while in school, they dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and I said to myself, "What the heck is the atomic bomb?" I'm used to 2,000-pound bombs, 500 pound bombs.

But I remember the Detroit newspapers, after the bomb was dropped, was saying this is what a 2,000-pound bombs—had graphs on the front page of the paper—would do this much damage and the atomic bomb would do that much damage. And then of course, the third day, three days later, Japan, I think, was confused. They didn't know what to do after the bomb hit 'em. Now, Japan wanted to surrender earlier, but they wanted a conditional surrender. They wanted to call certain terms. United States said, "No deal. We want an unconditional surrender. We tell you what to do."

So three days later, they drop the second bomb on Nagasaki and now Japan has agreed to surrender. And I remember, while at radio school in Dearborn, Michigan, President Truman went on the radio—and I believe it was a Tuesday night around seven o'clock—and talked to the American public. And he stated, "You've all heard Japan has agreed to unconditional surrender," and he made a little speech.

When he got through making that speech, the word came out over the P.A. system, "All hands fall out on the parade grounds."

Our commanding officer was going to speak to us, the commanding officer of that school area. So we all filed in, with our hands behind us, at ease and he spoke to us. He said, "You all heard President Truman has just announced Japan has agreed to an unconditional surrender."

And he talked for a little while and his last words were, "Liberty begins in fifteen minutes." (Chuckles)

Now, liberty is freedom, you go on the beach, get away from the base. So we all proceeded back to the barracks and threw on our uniforms. I think they were blues in Detroit. And we went downtown Detroit and that's where I was V-J Day.

JP: Yeah.

PS: It was a wild night. It was just like Times Square. Maybe not a thing, but it was close to it.

JP: Well, I think we're going to finish there. We're running out of tape right now. We've quite a bit of time. So I appreciate your time and for your history. We really do appreciate it.

PS: Are you all through?

JP: We are through.

PS: Okay.

JP: Thanks, Peter.

END OF INTERVIEW